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ABSTRACT

Although educational assessment has played a pivotal role in American education for well more then 50 years, it remained in the background of our nation's policy debated and was considered a technical, if not esoteric, field. This chapter explores what events and trends led to the transformation of educational assessment into nightly "table talk", the strong political dimension to educational assessment, and aspects of government educators and policymakers should bear in mind as they go about their work. (GCP)

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# *Educational Assessment in a Reform Context*

By
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# Chapter 23
# Educational Assessment in a Reform Context

*Michael H. Kean*

It is difficult to believe that there was a time when the day's news *didn't* contain any mention of educational assessment. Up until the late 1980s, governors, state legislators, members of Congress, journalists, and other pundits knew little and said even less about how U.S. students were measured and educational programs were evaluated. Although educational assessment has played a pivotal role in American education for well more than 50 years, it remained in the background of our nation's policy debates and was considered a technical, if not esoteric, field.

Fast forward to today. Governors' speeches are peppered with remarks about accountability and standardized testing. Members of Congress engage in lengthy and often acrimonious debate over proposals for national testing of elementary and secondary school students. Local journalists routinely report on educational standards and testing. Moreover, the discussions do not end in the political arena. In political polling parlance, testing has become nightly "table talk" over dinner for moms, dads, and their kids.

At the same time (and through no coincidence), assessment is playing greater roles in the current educational environment. Assessment results are a major force in shaping public perceptions about the achievement of our students and the quality of our schools. Educators use assessment results to help improve teaching and learning as well as to evaluate programs and the effectiveness of schools. Educational assessment is also used to generate the data on which policy decisions are made. Because of the important role it performs, assessment is a foundational activity in every school, in every school district, and in every state.

What events and trends led to the transformation of educational assessment into nightly table talk? Why is there now a strong political dimension to educational assessment? Which aspects of assessment should educators and policymakers bear in mind as they go about their

work? This chapter will provide answers to all these questions.

## The Political Context of Reform

Over the past 20 years, education reforms have generally been of three types: structural, process, or content:

**Structural reform** refers to changes in the *structure* of education, such as a longer school day or school year, smaller class sizes, magnet schools, charter schools, or a middle school versus junior high school system.

**Process reform** refers to the *way* in which teachers teach and students learn. Team teaching, reading recovery, and use of educational software are examples of process reform.

**Content reform** refers to *what* teachers teach. Examples are phonics or whole language approaches to reading, new math, and standards-based curricula.

Testing entered the political realm with the advent of standards-based school reform, which is both a process reform and a content reform. This reform focuses on improving our schools, increasing student achievement, and building accountability for results through a system with three primary components: (a) new (and higher) *standards,* (b) new *assessments* designed to measure those standards, and (c) *consequences* for meeting or not meeting the standards. Politics is part of this process because of its traditional and rightful (but often unpredictable) role as the driver of policy in our national and state democracies.

The standards-based movement emerged in the early 1990s as a response to the call to arms issued by the 1983 release of *A Nation at Risk*. This slim but seminal report from the National Commission on Excellence in Education characterized U.S. schools as wholly inadequate and went so far as to say, "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war" (p. 1). In short order *A Nation at Risk* galvanized policymakers at the federal and state levels. The nation's governors, acting collectively through the National Governors Association, developed and issued *Time for Results* (1986), a report that called for, among other things, greater

accountability in our nation's public schools. Out of this period emerged a group of "education governors" who would later make their mark in education on the national scene: Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander, Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton, South Carolina Governor Richard Riley, and Colorado Governor Roy Romer. Whereas Alexander and Riley would serve as U.S. Secretaries of Education in the 1990s and Romer would lead many national panels on education, Clinton forged a legacy as the nation's most active education president.

By 1989, concern over the nation's schools reached the level where the governors and President George H. Bush convened the first ever National Education Summit, in order to propose solutions. The fall summit, held at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, culminated in an agreement to set six (later expanded to eight) broad National Education Goals. The goals were developed and released in 1990. At the same time a federal commission—The National Education Goals Panel—was created by Congress to track national and state efforts to reach these goals by the year 2000.

Although the National Education Goals were not reached by 2000, their impact was felt in two ways. First, they focused public attention on the need for increased student achievement. Second, they served as the starting point for the development of new education standards. This development began at both the federal and state levels, though it was action at the federal level that spurred many states to begin developing and setting their own standards.

Federal action came initially in April 1991 in the form of America 2000, the George H. Bush administration's education proposal. America 2000 set forth voluntary national standards in a range of subject areas and proposed a series of national tests. Although America 2000 did not find its way into law by the end of the first Bush administration, the Clinton administration came forward with a similar proposal, called Goals 2000 (signed into law as the Goals 2000: Educate America Act in 1994). America 2000 and Goals 2000 had some distinct differences, but they were alike in their drive for high standards and new assessments to measure student progress.

Goals 2000 became the most pervasive national K–12 education policy in a generation. It provided federal incentives for states to create new systems of accountability by setting their own standards and creating new assessments, which the states did. At the start of the decade only a handful of states had academic standards. By the end of it, close to 50 states had developed standards.

Despite its pervasiveness and its affinity to the America 2000

proposal, Goals 2000 found itself in the mid- to late-1990s under increasing attack from Republicans and conservatives, who felt the federal government had overextended its reach into state and local education policies. Republican critics claimed that while Washington had historically funded K–12 education at low levels (current funding is approximately nine cents on the dollar), it exerted too much authority in local classrooms. This sentiment led to a policy standoff in the fall of 1997 when the Clinton administration watched its proposal for voluntary national tests in reading and mathematics go down to defeat on Capitol Hill.

In early 2001, the administration of President George W. Bush introduced No Child Left Behind as its proposal for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The legislation sought greater accountability through annual testing in grades 3 through 8 in reading and mathematics, but left states to set their own standards and choose their own tests. In doing so, Washington not only re-established individual student progress as a central tenet of ESEA, it also found a politically acceptable compromise on assessment. In late December 2001, Congress passed the legislation by a wide bipartisan margin. President Bush signed the act into law soon after.

## Federal Policy Issues

Invariably, and sometimes unfortunately, a recurring set of issues continues to evolve around Washington education debates. Like entrenched armies on the Western Front in the First World War, politicians often fight battles over and over on the same ground for years, and no real victor emerges. Typically, education debates in Washington have to do with the federal government's regulatory power and its authority over our nation's decentralized public education system.

**Washington's authority.** Local and state control of education is a deeply rooted concept in the United States. It remains so today, with the 50 states and tens of thousands of localities providing 91 percent of the funding at the K–12 level. Not a single education bill is debated in Congress today without at least one lawmaker (and usually many more) questioning the authority of Washington to impose educational mandates on the states and the nation's 15,600 school districts. Lawmakers from both sides of the aisle raise the issue, particularly when Congress mandates billion-dollar programs such as the Individuals With Disabilities Act (IDEA) and fails to fully fund them.

**The "devolution revolution."** With the Republican sweep of Capitol Hill in the November 1994 midterm elections, the devolution revolution was set in motion. The idea is to devolve as much federal authority as possible to the states and localities, where better decisions might be made. Although this devolution is often viewed as a Republican philosophy, many centrist Democrats also favor devolution initiatives. To date, the revolution has been seen most clearly in Congress's massive overhaul of welfare and job training programs. It has also appeared in the education arena, however, where it emerges in debates over block grants, program consolidation, and "ed flex," all of which opt to lift regulations prohibiting the blending of federal dollars from various programs. Whereas Democrats argue that federal education programs and their accompanying dollars should be carefully targeted to specific populations, Republicans counter that regulations should be lifted so that states and local schools can determine how best to use federal monies. There has not been a clear winner in the debate. Although more flexibility has been provided in various laws, many federal programs—rightly or wrongly—remain prescriptive in their aims and targeted populations.

**Testing on a national scale.** Between 1991 and 2001 Congress has had three major debates over testing: first with America 2000 in 1991, second in 1997 with the Clinton administration's voluntary national test proposal, and again in 2001 with the testing proposal in No Child Left Behind. Each debate has raised concerns over Washington's role in dictating how states should evaluate students.

**Opportunity to learn standards.** In 1991 congressional critics of America 2000 argued that if Washington was going to require new, higher academic standards, schools should have increased funding so that they could better prepare students to reach those standards. This same argument has emerged in 2001 as Congress debated the reauthorization of the ESEA.

**Use of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).** Congress has often debated the notion of expanding the NAEP to measure individual student progress. Historically, the NAEP mission has been to intermittently sample student performance in various subject areas. Because of that, various attempts to expand NAEP have encountered opposition on Capitol Hill from lawmakers who fear NAEP expansion would lead to a national test.

## State Policy Issues

The list of issues at the state level is more extensive than at the federal level because state policymakers, unlike members of Congress, have been closely involved in setting standards and shaping new assessment programs. The list of important issues for these policymakers ranges from the use of multiple measures to legal defensibility to public relations.

**Governance.** Consideration of major public policy in any state is a complex undertaking involving a number of different policymakers. While many governors play a central role in leading education reform in their states, at least three other individuals or entities—the state commissioner or superintendent of education, the state board of education, and the state legislature—play crucial roles, too. As the "dance of legislation" occurs, each of these individuals and entities contribute to the debate in some way.

**The need for the right kind of information.** States are in a unique position to use assessments for generating the types of data that policymakers, educators, and parents need to make decisions about their schools and students. State assessments more frequently serve as the "accountability fulcrum." Why? Because most assessment programs at the local school district level are designed primarily to improve teaching and learning, not to collect extensive, reliable data on student performance. Meanwhile, at the national level, the NAEP—an assessment sanctioned and funded by the federal government—generates snapshots of how small samples of students are performing in a given subject at a particular grade level. NAEP cannot expand on this snapshot function without igniting debates on federal versus state and local governance in education. This situation provides the states with the opportunity to generate more relevant statewide data on their students and school systems. Typically, this is accomplished by giving students a standardized, norm-referenced test. This type of test yields a variety of rich, reliable data that can be used for both statewide accountability purposes and to determine individual pupil progress toward meeting state standards.

**Sequencing.** Successful standards-based reform is based on a sequence where goals are developed first, followed by standards, then new curricula and instructional approaches, and finally assessments.

**Standards setting.** How standards are developed has been a very important issue for states. Great care must be taken to ensure that educators, policymakers, business leaders, and other key players are involved in creating new standards. Many states have developed both curriculum standards—criteria describing what students should know and be able to achieve—and performance standards—levels of acceptable student performance. Major test publishers work with standards-setting groups in the states to ensure that newly formulated standards can be measured by valid, reliable, and fair assessments.

**High-stakes testing.** The term *high stakes* refers to the use of assessments for purposes such as promotion and retention of students; graduation or exit exams; and rewards or penalties for schools or educators based upon student performance.

**Legal defensibility.** Because of the trend toward high-stakes testing, legislators and other state policymakers must ensure that state testing programs can withstand legal challenges. For instance, the number of lawsuits over high school graduation exams is increasing and is likely to continue to do so. Because of that, states must work closely with their assessment contractors to see that the tests used are valid, fair, and reliable.

**Multiple measures.** No single test can do it all, and no single assessment should serve as the sole evaluation tool in measuring performance. Multiple measures such as additional tests, grades, and teacher-made classroom quizzes—must be used to fully gauge student achievement.

**Inclusion.** Standards-based education reforms aim to set higher expectations for all students. In doing so, however, great care must be taken to accommodate children with special needs and those whose first language is not English. These children must not be left behind. The very core of standards-based reform is opportunity: the opportunity for *all* children to learn. Legislators, state education departments, curriculum developers, and test and textbook publishers have moved quickly in recent years to ensure that all students have the tools they need to learn and to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

**Report cards.** Nearly all states (and many local school districts) now publish and disseminate report cards on individual districts and schools. These report cards serve a valuable function in informing parents and

the public about the performance of their local public schools.

**Communications and public relations.** The standards-based movement represents a very significant change in how our schools go about educating children. Students, entire schools, and in some cases, teachers and administrators, must now meet higher expectations. When they do not, there may be consequences. Students may not be allowed to graduate, schools may face reconstitution with new leadership and teachers, and teachers may face loss of merit pay. Listing these consequences is not meant to cast standards-based reform in a negative light. Reform has generally been successful in bringing to public schools new standards of excellence, innovative curricula, challenging assessments, and new teaching strategies. Unfortunately, not all members of the public see and understand these positive changes. They see only the bad news of the high-stakes era. We now know why. Well into the 1990s, educators, policymakers, and the schools failed to educate the public about standards-based reform. Whereas some key audiences, such as the business community, were brought on board early, many parents still do not understand the need to hold students to higher expectations through new standards and assessments. As a result, a small but shrill cadre of testing critics has created a testing backlash in some communities. Although this backlash is unlikely to do serious harm to the standards-based reform movement, it represents a lesson policymakers should heed: *Always communicate (and keep communicating) the benefit of your reforms to key audiences.* Use public relations strategies to build understanding and support for reform among teachers, parents, students, and the community at large.

## A Final Word: The Second Decade

The various federal and state issues outlined here represent the *current* political context that surrounds educational assessment. We are now in the second decade of standards-based education reform. Like any significant public policy change, the reform movement will be modified and refined in coming years. Educators and public policymakers should anticipate the debates that lead to these refinements. Crystal balls are usually murky at best, but we can anticipate the following changes:

**The Bush administration's annual testing initiative.** The first challenge will be to coalesce local and state testing programs in ways

that meet the Bush administration proposal for annual testing of students in mathematics and reading in grades 3 through 8. Great care must be taken to respect state and local educational goals and curricula while establishing annual testing regulations. Any suggestion from Washington regarding the shape or content of assessments could very well lead to resistance or a backlash from governors and state policymakers.

**Revised standards.** Educational standards are not static. They must evolve based on society's needs to educate and train its children. This means educators and policymakers must continue to research, write, and rewrite state and local standards. In this process public debates will occur over the content of standards and over how high to set standards at particular grades. It will also mean that classroom curricula, teacher training programs, and assessments will undergo constant modifications to reflect these new standards.

**The blending of curriculum and assessment.** Curriculum developers, educational technologists, and textbook and test publishers are working diligently to bring innovations to the classroom. Over the course of the next 10 to 20 years the greatest advance in standards-based education may be the blending of curriculum and assessment. Test items will be embedded in educational software so students can be measured as they learn. As a result, evaluation will become transparent and less time will be spent on taking formal tests. This development, perhaps more than any other, will silence the critics of assessment and cause the testing backlash to melt away.

**An educated public.** Despite the failure of the standards-based movement to quickly educate parents about standards, assessments, and high-stakes consequences, new public information campaigns will be designed to reach out to all sectors of the public and to build greater understanding and support.

**Teaching oriented to standards.** In the same way that the public was left behind in the first decade of the reform, so were many teachers who were not trained to teach to specific state standards. However, new teacher training programs for college students and in-service programs for current teachers are beginning to create a new cadre of educators oriented to standards-based reform.

Finally, if the reform movement is to reach its true potential, the second decade must be one in which no segment of the public is forgotten. Everyone engaged in public education—governors, parents, children, teachers, boards of education, school superintendents, state legislators, publishers, researchers, school administrators, college faculty, teachers' unions, and members of Congress—should have permanent seats at the table of education reform. The creation of public policy requires the firm and active participation of all affected publics. Education reform and assessment will always have its political and policy dimensions, but the inclusion of all publics will provide a firm foundation upon which to build such reforms.

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